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World

CIA admits big role in Nicaragua

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CIA OFFICIALS have told Congress that the intelligence agency has assumed virtual day-to-day control over guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan government, pinpointing their targets and plotting their attacks, according to congressional sources.

The CIA says this increased control over the guerrillas guarantees that the "secret war" will remain within congressionally approved guidelines. But congressional intelligence sources fear that the covert operation may be out of control.

Last week Congress began questioning whether the CIA had exceeded its authority. By law, that authority is limited to using the Nicaraguan rebels to intercept weapons sent from Nicaragua to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

Public statements by the Nicaraguan rebels, based in Honduras, have expressed no particular interest in stopping that weapons traffic. They say their aim is to overthrow the leftist Sandinista government in their homeland.

SOURCES IN Washington and Honduras say the CIA role shifted within the last month from arm's-length contacts with the guerrillas to daily face-to-face direction.

The sources, some of them briefed by CIA officials, said the CIA has provided these examples:

- CIA and U.S. military intelligence operatives confer daily with leaders of the 4,000 to 6,000 anti-Sandinista rebels operating inside Nicaragua and on the Honduran side of the 400-mile border. Previously it was reported that such contacts were made through Honduran intermediaries.

- American agents pinpoint targets for the rebels, plot how and when they should be attacked and debrief raiders when they return to Honduras from Nicaragua.

- CIA officials are asking Congress for at least \$20 million more to continue the operation well into 1984.

- Thousands of CIA-ordered listening devices and metal detectors are being deployed along Honduran-Nicaraguan border areas believed to be supply routes for arms to Salvadoran guerrillas.

- As many as five U.S. spy planes, their fuselages bristling with antennas, regularly sweep the border, as well as air and sea lanes between Cuba and Nicaragua. The Pentagon confirmed last week that sophisticated AWACS surveillance planes were being used "in the Caribbean area."

The CIA officials told congressmen that the thrust of the U.S. campaign continues to be to stop the flow of weapons to El Salvador and to gather intelligence on Sandinista and Cuban activities in Nicaragua.

"We are being told that, every day, Americans remind the rebels in Honduras what the purpose of the missions are and not to exceed their orders," said a skeptical congressional source. "They tell us that preserving U.S. control of the operation is now more of a priority than 'deniability.'"

CONGRESSIONAL sources said President Reagan signed a "presidential finding" in November, 1981, certifying the need for a covert CIA campaign to stem the unrest that he accuses Nicaragua and Cuba of sowing throughout Central America.

The finding was accompanied by a \$19.9 million budget, much of it to expand intelligence operations curtailed during the CIA upheavals of the mid-1970s, the sources said.

CIA Director William Casey asked Congress in January for \$20 million to continue the covert campaign into the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, the sources added.